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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: DEATH OF PATRIARCH ALEKSEY II

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) Patriarch Aleksey II, 79, died December 5 of heart failure. A temporary leader of the Church will be named on December 6, and a funeral is expected as early as December 7, but perhaps December 8 or 9. As a result, President Medvedev canceled a planned December 6 trip to Italy. According to Church guidelines, a new Patriarch must be selected within six months according to rules established by the temporary head. Condolences have poured in from Russian political and religious leaders, and the Ambassador issued a statement on the Embassy website. Metropolitan Kirill is reported to be the front-runner to become the next Patriarch, given his extensive public role with the ROC. Putin and Medvedev cultivated ties with the ROC, and observers do not expect the selection of the first post-Soviet Patriarch to disrupt the trajectory of closer Church-state ties. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Action Request: See para 9.

Patriarch Aleksey II Dies at Age 79

¶3. (SBU) On December 5, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Aleksey II died at age 79 at his residence in Peredelkino, outside of Moscow. Aleksey had led the Russian Orthodox Church since June 1990. ROC officials reported the cause of death as heart failure, and the Patriarch had suffered from chronic diseases and a stroke in Fall 2002. Nonetheless, the death came as a surprise, since Aleksey had led a service in the Kremlin on November 30 and appeared in good health during his recent meeting with the Ambassador on October 21. Father Zacchaeus, of the Orthodox St. Catherine's Church in Moscow, told us that "we are all surprised," as he had served with Aleksey in a service on December 2 and there was no indication then that the Patriarch was in pain.

Funeral Arrangements

¶4. (SBU) The most likely venue for the funeral is Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow. Traditionally, according to Father Zacchaeus, the funeral is held on the third day following the death, but since that will be a Sunday there is speculation that it may be December 8 or 9. Church officials revealed that Aleksey requested to be buried in Moscow's Bogoyavlenskiy Cathedral (also known as Elokhovski Church, which served as cathedral of the Patriarch from 1938-1991).

¶5. (SBU) President Medvedev's office confirmed that the president canceled his planned December 6 visit to Italy, indicating that he will attend the funeral. Funeral attendees likely will include major Christian leaders, possibly including Patriarch Bartholomew from Istanbul and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Vatican representation at the funeral could prove historic; if Pope Benedict chooses to attend (and if the ROC assents), it would mark the first ever papal visit to Russia.

¶6. (SBU) According to an ROC representative, the Church's Holy Synod will meet on December 6 to select the Church's interim leader ("mestoblyustitelya"), who then will establish the process for selecting a new Patriarch. Maksim Shchevchenko of the Public Chamber told us the most likely candidate for interim leader is Metropolitan Juvenale, the Synod's eldest member. The Church's bylaws stipulate that the next Patriarch must be selected within six months (May 2009). In addition, the new Patriarch must be at least 40 years old and have a "higher theological education and experience in diocesan administration." The new Patriarch will assume the rank officially at a ceremony (intronizatsii) a few days after his election.

¶7. (SBU) In November, Anatoliy Krasikov of the Institute of Europe and a scholar on the ROC, predicted that the next Patriarch would be Metropolitan Kirill. Kirill currently serves as the Church's head of external relations and has traveled extensively throughout South America and Africa in the past two months. Krasikov interpreted Kirill's wide travels as an attempt to make the Church an arm of Russian foreign policy, particularly with Aleksey's visit to Cuba in advance of President Medvedev's recent stop there. Other than Aleksey, Kirill has been the only ROC leader widely shown in the Russian media.

Condolences Pouring In

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¶8. (SBU) Messages of condolence have already poured in. Premier Putin called Aleksey's passing "a tragic, sad event and a great loss," and President Medvedev issued a statement from India that the death is a "great grief for the country." Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev expressed "shock" at Aleksey's passing, while Federation Council Chairman Sergey Mironov called Aleksey "a person of the highest intellect" who had united the Russian church. Council of Muftis leader Damir Gizatullin called Aleksey "one of the brightest representatives of Orthodoxy" who had organized inter-faith dialogue in Russia and abroad.

Action

¶9. (U) Action Request: The Embassy has posted the following statement on its website, and Post suggests that the Department and White House also issue statements of condolence.

"I was deeply saddened to learn of the death of Patriarch Aleksey II. The Patriarch inspired the people of Russia by the example of his devotion and tireless work. He will be remembered around the world for his leadership of the religious revival in Russia after the fall of Communism. I will personally remember him as a man of courage, wisdom, warmth, and deep faith.

John Beyrle, Ambassador of the United States of America"

(End Text)

Comment

¶10. (SBU) Putin and Medvedev have studiously cultivated their relations with the Church by attending services and soliciting its blessings. Few observers believe that the selection of Russia's first post-Soviet Patriarch will disrupt the trajectory of closer ROC-state ties. End comment.
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